

# SAMPLE A

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: THEATRE

(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: A DAGGER OF THE MIND : HOW THE SEMIOTICS  
OF MACBETH'S DAGGER CAN INFLUENCE AN AUDIENCE AND THE ACTOR.

## Candidate's declaration

*If this declaration is not signed by the candidate the extended essay will not be assessed.*

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

I am aware that the word limit for all extended essays is 4000 words and that examiners are not required to read beyond this limit.

This is the final version of my extended essay.

Candidate's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 09/02/09

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## Supervisor's report

The supervisor must complete the report below and then give the final version of the extended essay, with this cover attached, to the Diploma Programme coordinator. The supervisor must sign this report; otherwise the extended essay will not be assessed and may be returned to the school.

Name of supervisor (CAPITAL letters) \_\_\_\_\_

## Comments

Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.

has approached this essay diligently and with enthusiasm. His initial focus when suggesting the topic was more towards the realm of film as a natural and familiar discipline to investigate semiotics, however, he addressed this one, reformed the topic after reading around and researching Theatre Semioticians.

chose a difficult subject to look into and even though he narrowed the scope, I felt it was a large area to explore sufficiently well in four thousand words. He encountered a deal of difficulty in tracking down and selecting appropriate sources which would support his hypothesis. Images of Post productions featuring Act II, Sc I of Macbeth were harder to find than textual references from critics and academics. To clearly see the sign system working in a theatrical context, decided to test his theory by practical exploration. This experiment showed was capable of using his initiative.

This was a brave strategy and a risk that threw up some very interesting information (contradictory to his initial argument), that was able to reflect upon and assimilate into his essay. In the Viva Voce interview, Thomas answered confidently on sign system and how an audience can be manipulated by the judicious tweaking of the mise-en-scene.

I have read the final version of the extended essay that will be submitted to the examiner.

To the best of my knowledge, the extended essay is the authentic work of the candidate.

I spent 3 hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

Supervisor's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: 13 Feb 2009

This essay is a bit of a mixed bag.

The RQ is commendable, albeit a bit too broad.

The student copes well with the shift in his hypothesis, but there is a feeling that the feedback on practical exploration should have been more elaborate.

The student grapples with a complex topic with mixed results. There is an understanding that underlies most of his exploration, though some might be based on assumptions more than on analysis.

More theoretical reading on semiotics is required to improve the depth & breadth of analysis.

Name:  
School:  
School Code:  
Candidate Number:

# **A Dagger of the Mind**

How the Semiotics of Macbeth's Dagger can  
Influence an Audience and the Actor.

**By:** ...

**Word Count: 3878**



**2008/2009**

## Contents

Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Main Body:	
Brief Description of Semiology.....	5
The Dagger and the Ghost.....	5
Complications.....	7
How the Audience is Affected.....	9
How the Dagger has been Shown in the Past.....	10
How the Audience Connects with Macbeth.....	12
Practical Research.....	15
Conclusion.....	17
Bibliography.....	19
Appendix.....	20


## Abstract

How can the semiotics of Macbeth's dagger influence an audience and the actor playing Macbeth? The vision of the dagger that spurs Macbeth on to the murder of Duncan is a famous scene from Shakespeare. My goal was to research how directors in past productions decided to portray that particular scene (with focus on the dagger), and in particular view how the audience might read a director's interpretation through the semiotic information conveyed within the *Mise-en-scene*. To further research the semiotic impact of the illusionary dagger I decided to conduct a practical experiment consisting of two almost identical performances with the exception being the visibility of the dagger. I concluded that whilst an audience in Shakespeare's time may have viewed the information as proof positive of the preternatural influence of malign spirits or witchcraft; the modern audience and actor are usually able to connect more with the character of Macbeth without the dagger being visible, and that the election to show or not show the dagger can have a significant impact on interpretation of Macbeth's personality and predicament.

✓  
excellent abstract  
in terms of scope  
perhaps focusing  
on audience  
reception would  
or the actor (?) have helped  
narrow down  
the topic  
sufficiently  
Also, focusing  
on a specific  
production  
or a comparison  
between two  
productions  
may have  
provided  
a more  
potent  
ground  
for analysis

## Introduction

In our modern era, people live in a world that is powered by technology. We are subjected to a constant bombardment of information. With this in mind, what time do we have to pay attention to detail? How could such a thing be beneficial? I hope to, by the end of this paper, conclude that paying attention to small details in theatre could be extremely beneficial to the audience member, to the actor, and the director, by using the example of Act II Scene I in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. I will hopefully show that paying attention to detail can help promote audience enjoyment of a performance, how a performance can provoke an audience and how an actor can come to terms with himself and his performance. I intend to prove these points, by researching past productions of this play and viewing and extracting critics' opinions on the *mise-en-scène*, and utilizing their interpretations of this particular scene. I also plan to have an actor perform this scene with and without the dagger being visible in front of an audience, and questioning both the actor and the audience members if the ability to see the dagger changed how they interpreted the performance and if they connected more with the character of Macbeth. My hypothesis is that if the dagger is visible to the audience and the actor, it acts as a facilitating object or conduit in terms of comprehension, communication and connection. I expect the actor playing Macbeth to be able to relate more with the role he is taking on by having a physical object to relate to, and I expect the audience to, similarly, relate to the character of Macbeth, and to be able to decode and/or interpret the *mise-en-scène* with the aid of the semiotic effect of the dagger that works as a sign system that might be interpreted as an indicator of Macbeth's agitated mental state.



## Semiology

Semiotics or semiology is the study of signs or sign systems (in this case presented on stage or on the screen), and attempting to decode and understand their meaning and their purpose. In this case, the semiotics presented and referred to, should be taken as a method that the playwright uses to portray a certain message or to symbolise something. It should also be acknowledged, in the following examples, as a possible tool that has the ability to facilitate a scene, or to facilitate the understanding because of its ability to show meaning. This tool can be used by the author, but also by the director of the production and by the actors playing the characters. ✓

The idea of creating some sort of communication with the audience through the *mise-en-scène* (or portraying emotions, ideas or images that would not be necessarily obvious) can be traced back to Aristotle, in his work, *Poetics*. What we nowadays refer to 'Semiotics', however, originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from Russian formalist critics, and expanded to (firstly and mostly) Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>1</sup> and Charles S. Peirce<sup>2</sup>, who, through their specialities of linguistics and philosophy respectively, began to, as semioticians, expand the topic even more, and gave it the thought and importance we give it today.<sup>3</sup>

When we now study the works of William Shakespeare, we question whether he purposely placed several items on stage (or in the minds of his characters) that have the purpose of having more than one meaning that is beyond the obvious. I believe that using the dagger in Act II Scene I and Banquo's ghost in Act III Scene IV are key examples of sign systems, and I can show just how important semiology and paying attention to detail can be.

## The Dagger and the Ghost

I choose the particular scene of Act II Scene I because it creates several options, and it is as a doorway into the character of Macbeth (because this is when Macbeth first decided to kill Duncan and lie to Banquo and therefore starts his journey towards his eventual downfall). This is his first soliloquy after his dialogue with Lady Macbeth concerning their future and their options. In this speech the audience is able to see the transition of Macbeth's thoughts, how he is altered by the circumstances. It gives the audience glimpses into the character's core, and that is why it is a crucial scene. The most pertinent question a director can ask himself in relation to this scene is 'How to represent the dagger?'. The symbolism behind the idea that Macbeth 'sees' a dagger in front of him at first seems to be rather simple. His mind is playing tricks on him (the inference being we do not usually see daggers we cannot grasp), the dagger symbolizes murder or death<sup>4</sup>, and also possibly that he believes that this is a 'sign', indicating that ✓

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<sup>1</sup> (1857-1913)

<sup>2</sup> (1839-1914)

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description of semiology and its practitioners see *The Field of Drama – How Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage & Screen* by Martin Esslin.

<sup>4</sup> The symbolism of what a dagger represents was concluded from (a)

<http://www.symbols.com/encyclopedia/20/2027.html> - "In genealogy it is used for *deceased* or *dead*." -



he should kill Duncan<sup>56</sup>. When looked at in more depth, however, this little detail in the play is far more than just a step in the path of the tragic hero's death. This is a pivotal point in the life of Macbeth. Although the theme of insanity is present several times throughout the play and in different characters, it is at this point where Macbeth says "I have thee not, and yet I see thee still", that nothing is ever the same for him again<sup>7</sup>.

The other hallucination generated by Macbeth's mind is the ghost of Banquo, in Act III Scene IV. This, rather than symbolising the blood that will be shed, it is a reminder to Macbeth (and the audience) of the terrible deeds that have occurred<sup>8</sup>, that Macbeth has murdered his former friend. Banquo's ghost not only shows the audience Macbeth's state of mental chaos<sup>9</sup>, but also, much like the showing of the dagger, reveals an element of the supernatural that Shakespeare implemented into his several works, due to the obsession with the supernatural that the audience in his time had<sup>101112</sup>. I am using the apparition of Banquo's ghost as another example that gives the audience an insight into Macbeth's mind (from the idea that the audience can, in most productions, actually see the ghost just like Macbeth), and to show some of the elements of the supernatural in *Macbeth*.

footnote, not  
confusing  
here

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Carl G Liungman, Swedish writer and semiotician, HME Publications. And (b) <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/dagger> - "Something that agonizes, torments, or wounds.", in this case both Macbeth and his victim. (Houghton Mifflin Company).

<sup>5</sup> This claim is made due to evidences similar to the evidences of the last footnote, but mostly from: <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/themes.html>, written by Brian Phillips and Ross Douthat, Harvard University Graduates - "When he is about to kill Duncan, Macbeth sees a dagger floating in the air. Covered with blood and pointed toward the king's chamber, the dagger represents the bloody course on which Macbeth is about to embark."

<sup>6</sup> "He [Macbeth] wonders whether the dagger is inviting him to do the murder." - Martin Stewart, *Macbeth - William Shakespeare*, Letts Educational Ltd (Hants 1994)

<sup>7</sup> This is explained as an "(...) intense sensory experience" by James Sale, *Macbeth - William Shakespeare*, York Press (London 1997)

<sup>8</sup> As phrased by Barbara Everett, "His [Macbeth's] journey towards murder is both unerring and pathless." - Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet - Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Oxford University Press (New York 1989)

<sup>9</sup> In the words of Matthew Monroe, PhD, <http://www.field-of-themes.com/shakespeare/essays/Esupernatural.htm>: "The appearance of Banquo's ghost provides insight into Macbeth's character. It shows the level that Macbeth's mind has recessed to." And this can of course be said about the dagger, too.

<sup>10</sup> "In the time of William Shakespeare there was a strong belief in the existence of the supernatural. Thus, the supernatural is a recurring aspect in many of Mr. Shakespeare's plays. In two such plays, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the supernatural is an integral part of the structure of the plot. (...) in *Macbeth*, not only does a ghost appear but a floating dagger, witches, and prophetic apparitions make appearances." *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> "The 'fact' of witchcraft (...) was generally accepted by many of the best minds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." - G. Blakemore Evans, *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama - The Theatre in Its Time*.

<sup>12</sup> "Reginald Scott (1538-99) wrote his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584. In it, he demystifies many of the standing superstitions of the time concerning witches and witchcraft. There is a tradition that Shakespeare read and greatly admired the book. It is believed to be a secondary source for *Macbeth*" - David Crystal and Ben Crystal - *The Shakespeare Miscellany*

## Complications

In film, directors are faced with different questions and options than in theatre. Because of technological developments, it is possible to portray almost anything on screen, but on stage, things are different. In BBC and Time-Life Films' production of *Macbeth*, in the dagger scene, as Macbeth asked himself if the dagger he sees in front of him is real, the audience does not see it, only him grabbing a handful of air, and claiming that he cannot touch what he sees<sup>13</sup>.



Figure 2 – A series of images showing the actor, Nicol Williamson, grabbing nothing.

In Roman Polanski's version of the play, however, a dagger *is* shown, a floating, glittery, slightly blue dagger<sup>14</sup>.

play or  
film?

<sup>13</sup> See Figure 2.

<sup>14</sup> See Figure 3.

figures 2 &  
3 need to  
be fully  
referenced



Figure 3 – Macbeth's vision of the dagger in Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*.

This question of whether to 'physically' portray the dagger or not, is not merely the matter of funds. It requires a creativity and theatricality on the part of the director to realise the image of the illusionary dagger. Considering the BBC and Time-Life Films' production (a filmed theatrical production), one can rarely see a background that varies from walls, rocks, chairs and intense lighting<sup>15</sup>, one might assume that that production did not have much money to apportion to special effects. An alternative reading may be that the deliberate spare nature of the set focuses an audience on the internal journey or dilemma presented to Macbeth and that the power of theatre lies not in special effects but in the ability to manipulate an audience into filling the space with their own imagination. The Royal Shakespeare Company's recent director for *Macbeth*, Dominic Cook's gives another opinion "You could always find a reason not to put furniture in Shakespeare because in the (...) original theatres that the plays were done in, there was a real flow of people on and off the stage and the scenes could cross over one and other", and he finds keeping the flow "very important"<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> See Figure 4.

<sup>16</sup> Quote from Dominic Cooke, director for The Royal Shakespeare Company.  
<http://www.rsc.org.uk/learning/hamletandmacbeth/mstagingchoices/props.htm>

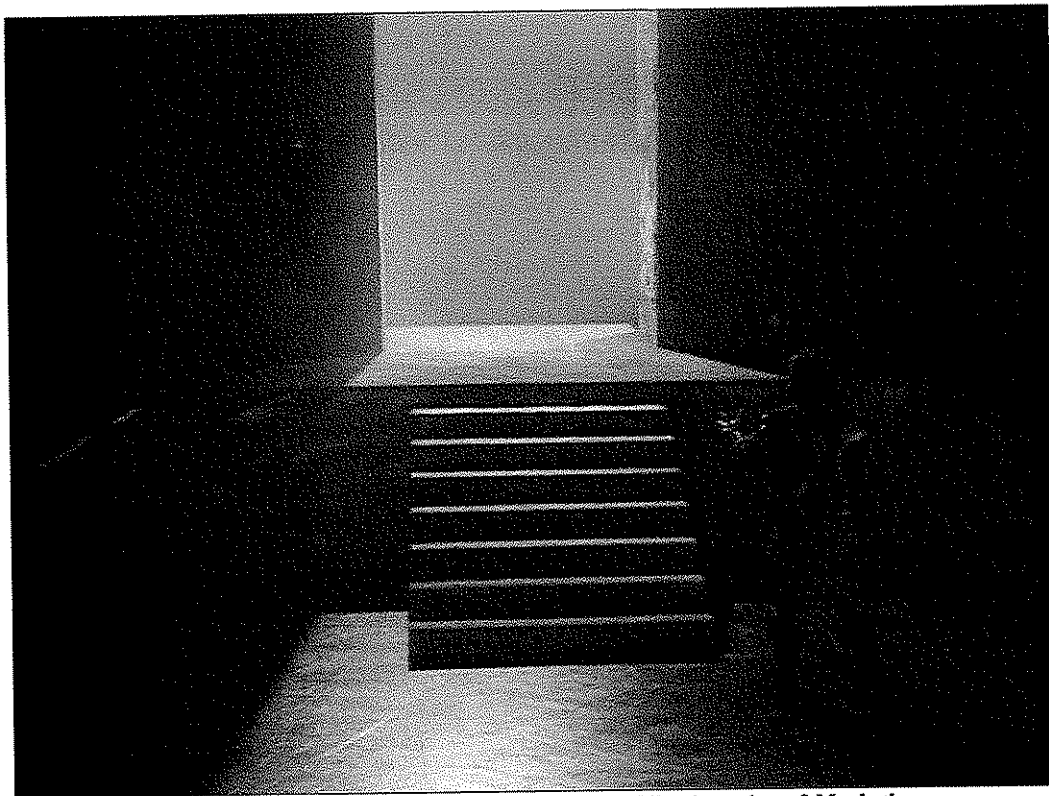


Figure 4 – The main set in BBC & Time-Life Films' version of *Macbeth*.

Roman Polanski's version clearly had chose to show the dagger. Could this work in a theatrical staging? Using projection or modern technology, it would be possible to represent the dagger on stage as a visible artefact. I believe this would aid actor and audience in understanding Macbeth's state of mind and I will attempt to prove this later in this essay with practical evidence, however critics of Polanski's choice refer to the dagger in mostly negative terms. For example: "The dagger of Macbeth's mind is a sparkling, chintzy-looking bit of special effects that elicits groans from the viewer."<sup>17</sup>

### How the Audience is Affected

My main point relative to the question 'Whether or not to show the dagger' is simple: Considering that this is a turning point in the life of Macbeth, and the plot, and that we can 'see' deep into the core of the character, the audience here chooses whether or not to 'side' with Macbeth. My hypothesis is simple, playwrights utilise dramatic irony, the protagonist 'sees' something (i.e. a threat) that no-one else does. The audience *always* knows that there *is* in fact a continuous threat to each character, however, the audience cannot warn the other characters, and the other characters never believe the protagonist until it's too late. The audience, therefore, takes sides with the protagonist because *they know the threat is really there*. Since they see what the protagonist sees, they side with the protagonist. Whether or not to show the dagger can

<sup>17</sup> John Murphy, a reviewer, Bardolatry, Idylls Press, <http://www.bardolatry.com/polanskimacbeth.htm>

drastically affect the audience's feelings and interpretations of Macbeth. In any interpretation of the play, the lines are always the same, the changes come from what individual actor brings to Macbeth through the additional filter of a director. The dagger can be a huge opinion-changer. The audience may choose to like or dislike Macbeth all depending on whether or not they see the dagger. The reaction may be as simple as 'I know he isn't insane because I see the dagger too', and although this may not be completely true or accurate, perhaps by seeing the dagger just like Macbeth, they empathise or 'put themselves in his shoes'.

// ? is it the  
matter of  
liking or  
disliking or  
of sanity/  
madness  
✓  
&  
preconception  
is  
change  
or destiny  
↓  
what  
are you  
trying to  
argue  
here?

### How the Dagger has been Shown in the Past

My research shows, however, that most directors choose *not* to show the dagger. In Antonio Bibalo's opera version of *Macbeth*, Louis Gentile, the actor playing Macbeth, clutches yet another dagger that is not seen by the audience (Figure 2), much like Ian McKellen (Figure 3), in Trevor Nunn's 1978 television version of *Macbeth* (for the Royal Shakespeare Company), which was, basically a filmed version of his (Trevor Nunn) and the RSC's 1976 version in 'The Other Place'.

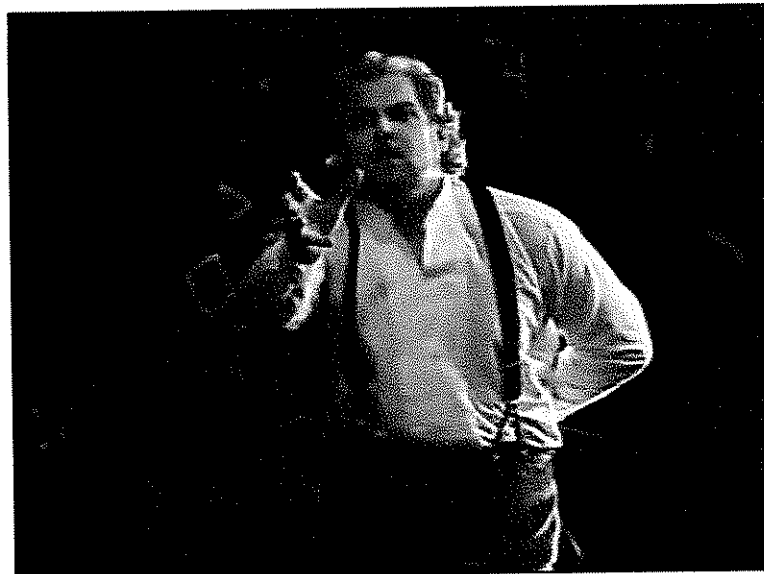


Figure 5 – Louis Gentile, the actor playing Macbeth, sees something we do not.



**Figure 6 – Ian McKellen, much like the previous image, takes hold of a ‘dagger’ that is invisible to the audience.**

Many aspects remain identical, such as the lighting and the fog-filled set. Props are immensely scarce, and despite, John Murphy’s (a reviewer) explanation “The horror is internal, not external” and since the production had actors of such grand calibre, “lavish sets and props would be an afterthought, even a distraction”<sup>18</sup>, the setting is as incomplete as BBC and Time-Life Films’ version. My initial position was that if the audience was to see the dagger, then they would tend to ‘side’ with Macbeth. In these versions, the audience does not even see furniture, so I don’t think the audience will be particularly pleased. The audience receives, in this case, a visual shock. The whole piece is focused only on the acting. This of course, can be good; the audience would likely be pleased to watch a magnificent performance of the actors playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Some people would agree that this decision would in fact be a good one. This is the case of Michael Brooke<sup>19</sup>: “Gold also decided to play down the supernatural elements, believing that these occurred primarily within Macbeth’s fevered imagination. Accordingly, neither the famous dagger, Banquo’s ghost or the line of kings in the witches’ second prophecy are depicted on screen. This approach relies heavily on the skills of the actor playing Macbeth, but Gold was well served by Nicol Williamson’s interpretation - even more than Ian McKellen in the Trevor Nunn RSC production.”<sup>20</sup>. Despite this, (and once again in Michael Brooke’s words), “Director Jack Gold made no attempt at visualising Macbeth’s various hallucinations (Banquo’s seat remains resolutely vacant during the ghost scene), suggesting that much of his torment was a product of his own imagination.”<sup>21</sup> This is in complete agreement with John Murphy’s quote about the horror being internal, not external, yet without the hallucinations being visible to the audience, the element of the supernatural is completely removed.

<sup>18</sup> Quotes from John Murphy, Idylls Press, <http://www.bardolatry.com/reviews/nunnmacbeth.html>

<sup>19</sup> Quote from Michael Brooke, a BFI Screenonline reviewer.

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/527694/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

## How the Audience and the Actor Connect with Macbeth

Macbeth is a character that has been debated by critics as to whether he is good, evil or simply mislead. This ambiguity is one reason as to why the audience has trouble identifying themselves in Macbeth, or identifying the thoughts going through his mind. The idea that Macbeth could be in turns both good or bad makes the audience mentally uncomfortable, because if they do imagine themselves as Macbeth, and if he turns out to be essentially evil, they will be disgusted, because of an audience's natural propensity to dislike 'the bad guy' (and this would be even more acute in the time that the play was written and performed due to the supernatural element and the prevailing beliefs of the day).

The feelings that the audience has towards Macbeth, and the interpretation they have of Macbeth's character can be crucial to the question 'How to represent the dagger?' because the dagger is said to be the catalyst that projects Macbeth into his bloody path and leads to his death<sup>22</sup>. This is said because shortly after Macbeth sees the dagger he decides to commit regicide. It can, therefore, also be said that the dagger reveals Macbeth's 'evil side', or that it in fact creates it. To our knowledge, Macbeth has never before hallucinated and has never before committed any 'evil' deeds, so it could be suggested that the two are interlinked. Also, it is possible that the understanding of the characters in a play could facilitate the understanding of the *mise-en-scène* and the semiotic aspects of the play. An example of this is Antonio Bibalo's opera version of *Macbeth* where the stage is a very large staircase that is filled with symbols (in the literal sense) of alchemic nature<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> "Covered with blood and pointed toward the king's chamber, the dagger represents the bloody course on which Macbeth is about to embark." - <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/themes.html>

<sup>23</sup> See Figure 7.

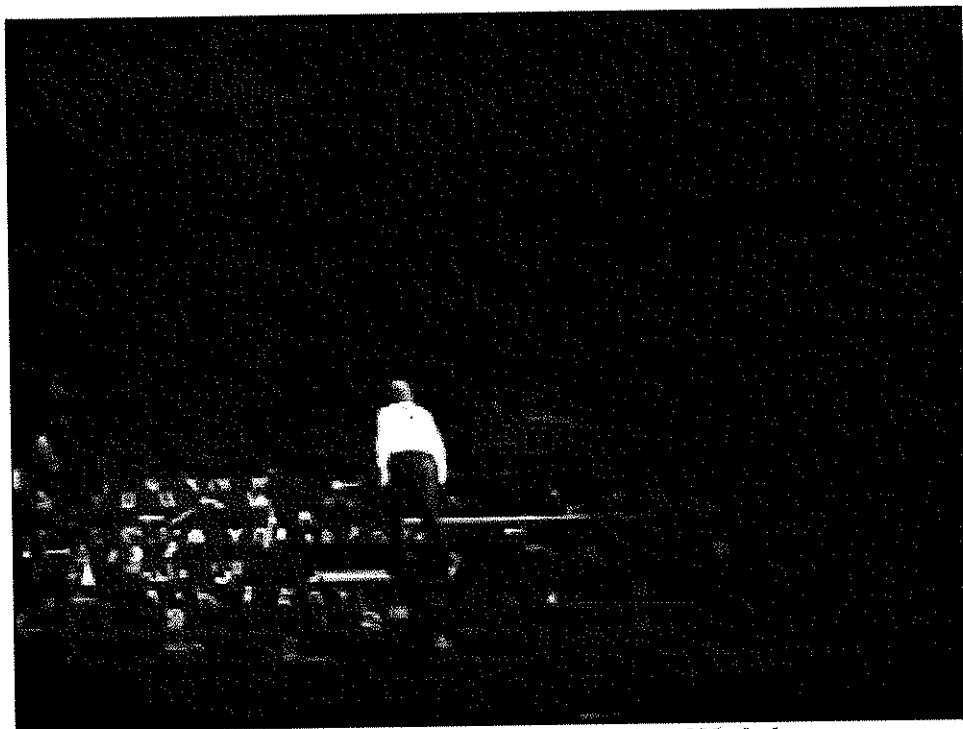


Figure 7 – The stage of Antonio Bibalo's opera version of *Macbeth*.

The audience would generally try to interpret this symbolic stage in any way they can, the cultural signifier being the implied association between Alchemic Symbology and the Supernatural, and the most logical thing to do would be to see if the actor can aid in its decoding.

As Martin Esslin puts it, "The actor is the iconic sign *par excellence*: a real human being who has become a sign for a human being"<sup>24</sup>, because the only other factor that may allow the audience to undeniably decide whether or not to like Macbeth, is the actor who plays him. It is assumed difficult to efficiently and credibly play a 17<sup>th</sup> century character, and connect (to a personal level) with a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, but according to this theory, both are equally important.

The actor can therefore have a tremendous impact on the whole production, and must choose his actions very carefully<sup>25</sup>. There are ways where the actor-spectator relationship can get very complicated. Returning to Antonio Bibalo's opera version of *Macbeth*, the actor playing the protagonist clutches his forehead as if a large amount of pain is coming from that area. *Immediately* after he does this, he 'sees' the dagger (which the audience does not), and begins his speech "Is this a dagger I see before me (...)" When someone clutches their forehead it is usually a fairly simple sign of distress (and therefore, the audience would assumingly interpret it in that way). However, in terms of semiology (and also in more practical terms) perhaps the idea had not the simplest of intentions. Perhaps the 'headache' was meant to symbolize a mental metamorphosis or schizophrenia. Let's imagine that, Macbeth has a sudden headache and then morphs into an 'evil' (or just plain different) form of himself. If Macbeth was

<sup>24</sup> Quote from *The Field of Drama – How Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage & Screen* by Martin Esslin.

<sup>25</sup> In the words of Roma Gill, "He [Shakespeare] wrote his plays to be *acted*; and it is by acting *Macbeth* that you will best be able to appreciate it." – *Macbeth*, Oxford University Press (Oxford 1977)



to get this 'headache' before his every hallucination and before his every 'crime', than we would have a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This, then, obviously poses a new and interesting question: If Macbeth turned into an 'evil' version of himself and *then* committed his alleged crimes, would the audience like him? Well this is no easy question to answer. We could try to claim that the audience simply could like his 'good side' and dislike his 'bad side'. This is what we do usually when we have, on stage or on the screen, a hero and a villain, however, when we have them *both* in one character, things get a little complicated. In a storyline, it is not uncommon to follow the life of a person that is regarded as being 'bad' or 'evil' by society. In these cases at least the spectators *know* that the protagonist is 'bad'. However in the case of Macbeth, where there is an on-going debate about him being essentially good or essentially bad<sup>26</sup>, the audience is (usually) forced to choose between the two.

The RSC's director for their recent production of Macbeth, Dominic Cooke, explains: "I think Macbeth is basically a good man. I think if he isn't, the play becomes far less interesting. I think the study of a psychopath is, to me, really not of interest, it doesn't have a universal significance."<sup>27</sup> And, I believe that by "universal significance", he is referring to the connection between the general audience member, and the character of Macbeth. This I have explained before. People tend to not associate themselves if the protagonist is predominantly 'wicked', but once again, we do not know for certain *what* Macbeth is. Assuming that when he performs his sinister deeds he is his 'evil self', but not 'himself', the general audience member would likely 'weigh' both sides of him to decide whether he/she likes Macbeth or not. It could possibly come down to (mostly) whether he is 'more good' or 'more bad'. The idea that people enjoy watching the mentally ill can be shown by William Hogarth's *In the madhouse*, where people take tours to glance at the 'amusing' mental patients<sup>28</sup>. Such habits could be accounted for by the fact that plays were even written about this Elizabethan past-time. This can be exemplified in Thomas Dekker and John Webster's *Northward Ho!*<sup>29</sup>, where several characters take turns in entertaining themselves by abusing the patients admitted in Bedlam Hospital<sup>30</sup>.

|| he is hailed  
as a hero in  
the beginning  
of the play  
& his house  
is described  
as "sunny"  
↓  
S gives us  
clues

<sup>26</sup> "He [Macbeth] cannot yet unburden the exercise of power – power as such – from the need for its cultural legitimation. This co-presence of irreconcilable drives his life of unified meaning." – John Drakakis, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, quoting from Franco Moretti, *Signs taken for Wonders – On the Sociology of Literary Forms*.

<sup>27</sup> Quote from Dominic Cook, Royal Shakespeare Company director,  
<http://www.rsc.org.uk/learning/hamletandmacbeth/mstagingchoices/props.htm>

<sup>28</sup> See Figure 8.

<sup>29</sup> (1607)

<sup>30</sup> Information gathered from *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama* by G. Blakemore Evans. For more insight on this topic, please consult this book.



Figure 8 – William Hogarth's *In the Madhouse*.

## Practical Research

For practical research I organized two short performances from the same actor<sup>31</sup> of Macbeth's speech in Act II Scene I. The idea was to have an actor perform the same speech as exactly as possible, with the only difference being the visibility of the dagger in question<sup>32</sup>. What I expected was that the audience and the actor would react differently to each performance and that both would prefer the version featuring a visible dagger as it was something tangible for both parties. For the audience, a tangible sign indicating possible mental degradation, allowing them to emphasise with Macbeth and for the actor a real definitive sign to aid in the suspension of disbelief required to enter the role convincingly.

<sup>31</sup> The actor which I chose to play Macbeth is a year 11 student is also an IGCSE Drama student, and therefore has significant knowledge of theatre and of the importance of semiotics.

<sup>32</sup> See Figure 9.

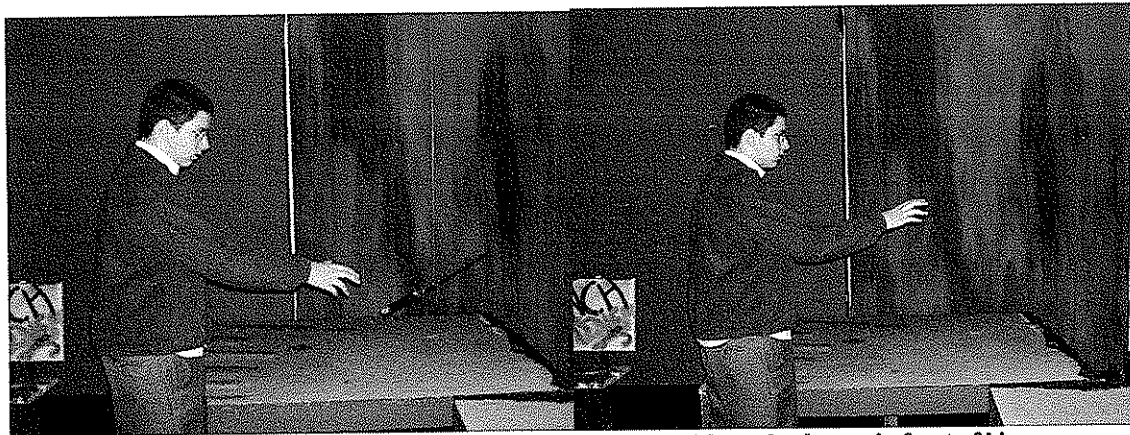


Figure 9 – The actor I used, Afonso Coelho, with and without the dagger in front of him.

The results were not as I had anticipated. This implies that seeing or not seeing the dagger made a noteworthy impact on the actor playing Macbeth and the audience. The audience watched both performances and then completed a short questionnaire on the performances<sup>33</sup>. The audience consisted of various elements of the student community including students, teachers and theatre teachers. Contrary to my hypothesis, most viewers stated that they preferred the second performance (which did not have a visible dagger)<sup>34</sup>.

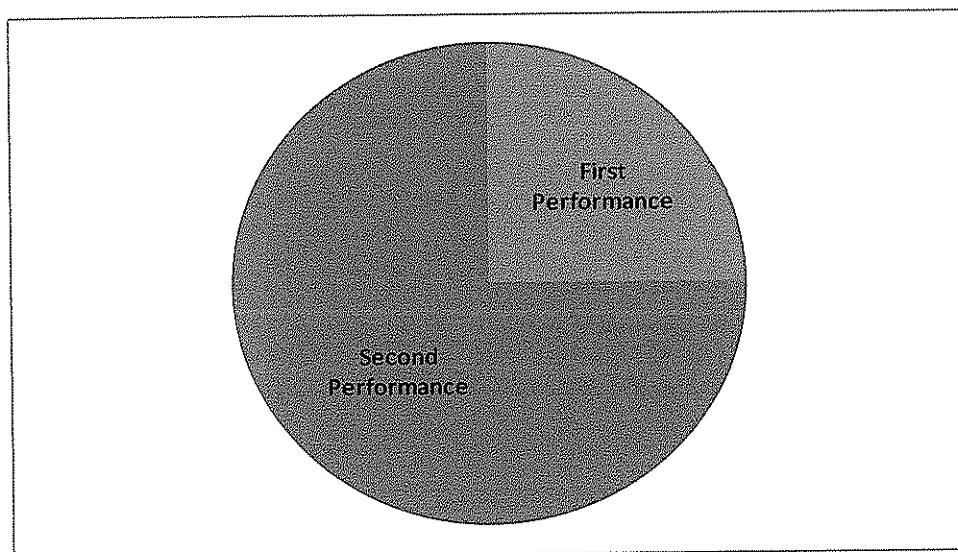


Figure 11 – Graph showing which performance the individual audience members found to be more effective.

Since they were forced to use their imagination, they sympathized more with Macbeth because they could not see what he was seeing. This was the opposite of my theory although some viewers shared my opinion: “With a dagger I ‘sympathized’ more with the character as I could see the vision with him. Without, it left him more mad as I

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>34</sup> See Figure 11.

couldn't see what he was seeing."<sup>35</sup> It should also be acknowledged that when the actor could see the dagger his performance was more "violent"<sup>36</sup> or "intense"<sup>37</sup>, as shown by these interpretations: "Body language first time seemed more involved e.g. more aggressive when pushing the chair."<sup>38</sup>, "His body language was more confident" and "Body language first time more violent"<sup>39</sup>. The actor also filled out the same questionnaire and explained that "I found it easier to concentrate on an empty point than a dagger."<sup>40</sup> What could be explained by this is that when there is no dagger present, the trauma that Macbeth experiences is much more internal. The actor's response to this experiment was that he also felt that his character "felt more shocked scared and nervous because I [the actor] did not have to concentrate on a point". This would suggest that in an actor's point of view it is easier to stare into nothing than to focus on a specific location, and hence, the actor is able to focus more on his/her performance. This, therefore, also concludes that it is more beneficial to omit the dagger rather than to show it.

go back to Stanislavski's techniques, it is a bit more complex than you present

## Conclusion

My practical research showed that my original hypothesis was mistaken in the way that the audience *prefers*<sup>41</sup> it when there is no dagger visible. It also demonstrated that the dagger, when looked upon with in detail, can have a remarkable effect on the actor-audience relationship, and this, therefore, was in complete agreement with my other hypothesis.

Perhaps an answer to more subtly influence the audience on the semiotic portrayal of Macbeth's insanity would be to have Macbeth develop a certain semiotic sign of mental illness that would gradually get worse as his sanity does. Despite this being a more subtle way to approach the issue, it would completely exclude the theme of the supernatural, the occult and witchcraft (much like in BBC and Time Life's production), and this can be regarded as very important, albeit not as important as it would have been to Shakespeare's audience<sup>42</sup>. In the words of Matthew Monroe relative to this topic: "The supernatural provides a catalyst for action by the characters. It supplies insight into the major players and it augments the impact of many key scenes. The supernatural appeals to the audience's curiosity of the mysterious and thus

<sup>35</sup> Quotes from an audience consisting of GSCE Drama students, Theatre Arts Higher students and a teacher of Drama and Theatre Arts.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Quote from Afonso Coelho (the actor with the role of Macbeth). All of the quotes above were chosen as a selection of the answers submitted. See Appendix for an image of the answers to the questionnaire.

<sup>41</sup> Or is "easier to concentrate" or "understand" or "sympathise" depending on the wording submitted by each audience member. See Appendix images of the questionnaires.

<sup>42</sup> Particularly in the era in which *Macbeth* was written, where "the 'fact' of witchcraft [...] was generally accepted by many of the best minds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." - G. Blakemore Evans, *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama – The Theatre in Its Time*.

strengthens their interest"<sup>43</sup>. The dagger may play the important role of symbolizing the whole theme of the supernatural and/or insanity, and so it cannot just be an invisible weapon. My opinion on this is that a modern-day society is still intrigued by the supernatural just as Shakespeare's contemporary audience were intrigued by it. Shakespeare included such large amounts of supernatural elements in *Macbeth* to satisfy King James I's appetite for the supernatural<sup>44</sup>. Even though nowadays we place witchcraft and sorcery into a mythical context, I believe this factor helps to intrigue us more: even though we accept these to be false, we are attracted to the fiction that surrounds them.

To conclude, we must never underestimate the power of the smallest detail. Paying attention to detail is often rewarding. Imagination is an endless resource, and when our mind shows us vivid images, we should never ignore them. Through my research it seems that with the omission of the dagger, the audience is generally more captivated with Macbeth's character. When the audience is propelled into using their imagination, without the dagger being physically present, the audience can actually 'see' more.

new issue  
is introduced  
too late in EE

Conclusion  
should have  
been more  
elaborate

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<sup>43</sup> Quote from <http://www.field-of-themes.com/shakespeare/essays/Esupernatural.htm>, Matthew Monroe, PhD.

<sup>44</sup> "James I, though not perhaps one of the best minds, was for many years a firm believer in witchcraft" – G. Blakemore Evans, *Elizabethan-Jacobean Drama – The Theatre in Its Time*.

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## Appendix

Appendix 1: The questionnaire that was given out to the audience members and to the actor.

1. Other than seeing a dagger, what differences did you notice between the two performances?
2. Did you feel you had a different connection with the character of Macbeth in each performance? If so, why?
3. Other than your connection with the character, what other differences did you notice/do you think can exist from showing or not showing the dagger?

Appendix 2: An example questionnaire that has been answered.

1. Other than seeing a dagger, what differences did you notice between the two performances?

→ Body language and speed varied.

1st Time: he seemed more involved e.g. more aggressive when pushing the chair.

→ speed was slower second time slightly unsure.

2. Did you feel you had a different connection with the character of Macbeth in each performance? If so, why?

Yes, in the first performance he was more capturing as his body lang was more confident.

However in the second he was more focused on creating something that wasn't there which was capturing in a different way.

3. Other than your connection with the character, what other differences did you notice/do you think can exist from showing or not showing the dagger?
- illusive effect: in the 2nd which was for me more capturing.

## Assessment form (for examiner use only)

Candidate session number	0	0	
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Assessment criteria		Achievement level		
		First examiner	maximum	Second examiner
<b>A</b>	research question	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>B</b>	introduction	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>C</b>	investigation	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>D</b>	knowledge and understanding	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>E</b>	reasoned argument	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>F</b>	analysis and evaluation	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>G</b>	use of subject language	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>H</b>	conclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>I</b>	formal presentation	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>J</b>	abstract	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>K</b>	holistic judgment	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
Total out of 36		<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>

Name of first examiner: \_\_\_\_\_  
(CAPITAL letters)

Examiner number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of second examiner: \_\_\_\_\_  
(CAPITAL letters)

Examiner number: \_\_\_\_\_